

Corydalis

By Midori Golike

At the base of the rocks, there perched small blue flowers with twisted petals like heron wings. They tittered softly with the gentle breeze.

Toma sprang off the boulder we sat on and plucked one of the flowers up by the stem. “This is what I was talking about! A corydalis! My namesake,” she exclaimed, holding it up like a trophy. The silvery ring tattoo on the back of her hand glimmered.

I looked up at it skeptically, squinting against the white morning light. “*That’s* a cory... corylaris? I feel like I’ve seen it in a book before. I thought they were poisonous.”

“*Corydalis*,” Toma corrected indignantly. “You and your books. You’re not remembering because you didn’t look at it with your own eyes. You’re probably thinking of something else. Why would my mother name me after a poisonous plant?”

“It’d fit you better.”

She yanked off my shoe and threw it into the surrounding forest.

“You’re only proving my point,” I quipped. “What’s a poisonous plant? Hydrangea?”

“That’s a pathetic poison! At least make it fierce.”

“I don’t find plants that scary. Should I call you a pufferfish instead?” I yanked my legs away before Toma could steal my other shoe. “What’s pufferfish in Sirokanese?”

“*Es wen sapa*. Which means ‘your mean head.’ ” She clambered back up the boulder and wrestled me for my lone surviving shoe, and I soon ended up in socks. Toma shoved the flower from earlier in my face, blinding me with brilliant blue. “Corydalis. Remember it,” she ordered.

“It’s so hard to remember,” I groaned. “I think you’re the only one who knows it.”

“*Toma* means corydalis, and corydalis is this blue flower. It’s that simple. Corydalis, corydalis, corydalis, corydalis.”

“Do you even know what *my* name means?” I protested, shielding myself from her flowery attacks with my arms.

“Carefree love, of course. It’s so adorable. No wonder you aren’t heir.” She grinned toothily, sitting back on the boulder. Wind tousled her short black hair, blowing it into her face.

“That’s not what it means!”

“But you could interpret it like that. If I’m a hydrangea, then you’re carefree love.” Her eyes widened as she spotted something behind me. “Oops.”

I turned to find the steward employed by my father standing amongst the ancient trees. Stiff and slightly slumped, he looked as if he had sprouted from the dirt alongside the maples and oaks.

“Lord Nakjin,” he sighed, addressing me. “I have told you not to go into the forest. And Miss Toma, I have asked you to not take Lord Nakjin out of town.”

Toma straightened, eyes deceptively bright. “I haven’t taken him far, sir. I can still see the town.” She pointed to where the forest was cut off and buildings were pounded by the sun.

The steward smiled slightly, skin crinkling like the seams in tree bark. “I am afraid that if you push too hard, Lord Nakjin may be prohibited from playing with you at all. It would pain me to see you two pried apart.”

I was the second son of a minor, *minor* warlord, so as long as I didn’t become an embarrassment, there was little attention directed toward me. Hoarding books was fine, even desirable when considering the eyes of capital intellectuals. Befriending the half-Sirokanese daughter of a renowned woodcarver was just barely acceptable. Getting eaten in the woods by a wolf would be a stain to the family name, alongside tripping myself with a practice sword.

“I understand,” Toma replied, still glistening innocently. “Let’s go, Nakjin. I told you that you’d get caught if you tried to run away and start your own empire.” She slid off the boulder and landed with a bounce.

“I didn’t say anything of the sort!” I objected. “*You* wanted to come find the flower. Where are my shoes?”

She turned toward the steward. “Sir, I fear Nakjin’s lost his mind. I don’t know what he’s talking about.” To Toma, I was just the boy who had stared for too long at the books her mother had bound.

I found my shoes as they were trying to become one with nature in their wornness. Would dirtying my socks also dirty my meager reputation? Maybe it didn't matter if no one saw the stains.

We returned to the tiny town spread out below the tiny castle on a tiny hill. The steward deemed it time for me to get my share of the droning of my brother's tutor, but he allowed me to walk Toma home, saying something about surveying her father's store for new pieces.

Toma grabbed my arm as I was about to get dragged away to my duties as the back-up heir. "Remember. *Corydalis*," she commanded, then pressed the shriveling blue flower in my hand.

"I'm not going to remember," I insisted. "I've never heard anyone else say that word before. Are you sure you aren't making it up?"

"Well, then I guess this flower will need to appreciate the only two people that can name it. Good luck swinging around your dummy sword. Don't trip."

I twirled the flower between my fingers as I walked home, and its uneven sky blue petals spun like a pinwheel. *Corylaris*? No. *Corydaris*...?

I blink. A *corydalis* is burned into my vision, floating like a dark revenant. My attention is locked on the banner hanging high above the corner of the palace courtyard, snapping in the gusts. The white *corydalis* crest emblazoned on it is too bright in the renouncing winter sun, flashing pure light into my sour eyes. I heave my gaze away from it, but the flowers are everywhere else: carved into the undersides of the veranda roofs, etched into the stone ground of the courtyard, painted onto the lacquered table beside me, stitched into my own clothing. It belongs to the imperial court now, and most of the flags in the country bear the *corydalis* crest.

It would be on all the flags—save for the personal banners of lords—if it was not for the irritant of resistance following the inconvenient death of the previous emperor. No matter. The unification will happen soon enough, now that the traitor is caught. The country will be firmly under the imperial court and the *corydalis* banner, just as we had planned. There will not be a soul in the world who is ignorant of the *corydalis* flower.

"Lord Regent," a meek voice calls. "It's cold. May the doors be shut?" The child emperor sits like a painted wooden doll in a grand room facing the courtyard. He hunches against the wind invading through the open sliding doors.

My skin has already gone numb, my joints crusted with frost. “My Liege, the ceremony will start imminently; I ask for you to be patient. There are things far more painful than the cold.”

The emperor slumps as if another weight has been rolled onto his back. “I- I understand,” he replies glumly.

I am the only one standing in the shadowed courtyard. The rest of the advisors sit on the veranda lining three of its four sides, the emperor on a raised platform at their center. They mutter and grumble, rubbing their hands together and wishing for braziers. Many wear the imperial crest.

Gravel crunches as four guards come escorting the traitor who is bound up by ropes and wire but walks passively. The soldiers force the prisoner to kneel in the center of the courtyard facing the emperor, then collectively step back. They retreat to the four corners of the square upon my order.

I stand close to the edge of the thin cloth the traitor kneels on and roll open a scroll. The wind buffets the paper, threatening its very existence. “Your Imperial Majesty, honorable advisors,” I call, “here sits Lady Toma of House Pasun, wretched traitor to the nation. She has been convicted of the following crimes: violating our country’s traditions, exploiting various officials to corrupt our government, arson, torture, attempting to stage a coup with warlords which has led to the deaths of some of our most decorated generals, and most foul of all, orchestrating the murder of our late emperor and his eldest son. This woman is responsible for the delay in unification.” I close the scroll, and one of the guards replaces it on the table. “Thus, a suitable punishment is in demand. Your Imperial Majesty, what penalty do you declare fit for Lady Pasun?”

“Lady... Lady P-Pasun! She will be beheaded!” squeaks the emperor. Ideally, he could have executed it with more certainty, but he has stated the correct punishment, as instructed.

“Is there any objection to this sentence?” I ask the advisors.

The most high-ranking officials have been part of the debate over the ruling, yet one protests, “She *murdered* the last *emperor*, Lord Regent, death is too soft a punishment, for she would be released from the shame of her crimes. Her memory ought to be wiped completely clean. Absolute nescience punishment: reduce her mind to that of an infant and rear her with guilt.”

“The emperor has *spoken*,” I reply. “However, if you require the explanation again, I will provide one.”

The advisor glowers and leans back. “I would like to hear it, then. I’m sure there are others who are interested.”

The traitor remains still throughout all this, kneeling.

I stare at the man, “Do you recall the time half our army was nearly wiped out in a pincer movement performed by a traitorous general and the enemy? Can you remember the troops that had conveniently been nearby at that time? The troops that saved us?” I rotate to face all the gathered in turn. “Lady Pasun had been a tactician essential to our effort these past decades. While her recent crimes are unforgivable, her previous accomplishments cannot be ignored. Without her, the late emperor would be alive, but without her, he would mean little to us, the nation. Consequently, we have decided that she has the privilege to die as herself.”

The emperor becomes rigid at my gaze. “Y-yes,” he blurts. “Lord Regent is... is correct.”

“Must you continue to challenge the emperor?” I inquire of the inconvenience. “His Imperial Majesty is becoming cold.”

The advisor scowls but dips his head toward his sovereign. “My apologies, My Liege.”

The emperor stiffens, then nods jerkily.

“We shall proceed,” I continue. One of the guards brings over a sword from the table and presents it like a holy offering. As the emperor’s regent and senior advisor, I am officially his arm that swings the blade of his will. The sword clacks mutedly and glints as I draw it, reflecting the bright sky, my tired face. I stride forward to stand beside the mat the traitor kneeled on. My arms move in familiar paths, thoughtless. They settle in front of me, the blade hovering above the traitor’s neck cleared of hair. The sword rises above my head, skewing to the left out of habit. My wide sleeves slide down my arms. Cold nips at my skin, binds my fingers to the sword’s hilt.

Killer of the ruler. Hindrance to unification. Traitor to the empire, to what we have created, the corydalis crest. Yes, she has been essential in the beginning, but the medicinal herb has become spoiled, or perhaps we have overused it and it has become poison. Having strayed from our goals, she is a blight now.

Perhaps, though, she can redeem herself; the empire and the influence of its name remains, and our flag still flies. She would be useful. We can work for a compromise between tradition and her ambitions.

“I don’t know why I’ve fought for this country,” Toma murmurs in Sirokanese. She glances up at me through tangled hair still wavy from a braid I once thought would never be loosened. *“I wouldn’t have let you steal my name if I knew you were going to give it to the court for decoration.”*

“What is she saying?” an advisor demands.

I break my stance, running a hand down the length of the sword and presenting it to the heavens, as if to purify it.

“When did you start rotting, Nakjin?” Toma hisses. *“No. Never mind. You’re ‘Lord Regent.’ Nakjin wouldn’t have let them throw me out and discredit me because of my blood. I should have been the senior advisor. The title wouldn’t have any meaning if it weren’t for me—”*

“Extend your neck,” I interrupt sharply. “Dying with grace is the only way to contribute anything decent to your name. Defy the emperor’s word again, and you will be sentenced to absolute nescience punishment.”

The traitor glares up, simmering. She stretches her neck forward but continues to stare.

The wind steals all sound. Then it drops, and the air is still.

Even when the ceremony ends, the emperor’s eyes remain stuck on the mat, staring through me when I crouch before him. “Did we need... to kill her?” he asks softly.

“She was your father’s murderer, My Liege,” I reply. “We have finally avenged him. Now he may rest peacefully.”

His glassy eyes finally see me but shift down away from my face. “Aren’t- aren’t there other ways? You could have not beheaded her.”

“You had given the order. If we had revoked it, the power of your words would have been weakened.” Yes. “I advise you to return to your quarters. There will be more braziers prepared.”

“Lord Regent, is nescience punishment that bad?” he asks, standing. “Is it really worse than death?”

“I believe so. You lose what created you, and afterward, you are only told the atrocities you committed but not the reason why. Could you imagine growing up, becoming conscious, all the while being guilty for a crime you don’t remember committing?” Then my memories will become fantasies, something only I truly hold. With the beheading, at least the memories remain etched in another brain, however dead those cells may be. Deep in there, buried under her new, poisonous ideas, there would be the vision of the country we had thought up.

“I ... That would be awful,” he mumbles, though I doubt a child so young understands the weight of memory. “What did she say?”

I dip my head and find brown-red speckles of dried blood on my clothing. “I’ve forgotten much of the Sirokanese I’ve learned. I assume she cursed us.”

A maid leads the emperor away.

The courtyard and the surrounding verandas are empty now. The air is dimming. With the death of the wind, the imperial flag sags, and the corydalis is disfigured in its folds.

Soon, there will not be a soul who does not know of the flower, but for the crest’s namesake... now only an elderly man and its killer knew of it. Later, it will only be myself. Eventually, it will only be the symbol of the empire.

My wife is cutting hydrangeas when I return home.

My clothes are tucked away without being washed.